DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 098 982 52 IR 001 366

AUTHOR	Gotsick, Priscilla
TITLE	Assessing Community Information and Service Needs. Revised Edition. Library Service Guide No. 2.
INSTITUTION	Morehead State Univ., Ky. Appalachian Adult Education Center.
SPONS AGENCY	Bureau of Libraries and Learning Resources (DHEW/OE), Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE	Nov 74
GRANT	OEG-0-73-5341
NOTE	27p.
EDRS PRICE	MF-$0.75 HC-$1.85 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS	Adults; Community Characteristics; Community Services; Data Analysis; *Data Collection; *Disadvantaged Groups; *Information Needs; *Library Planning; *Library Services; Questionnaires

ABSTRACT

One of a series on library services to disadvantaged adults, this guide gives a three step plan for assessing community information needs. Seven methods of information gathering are described, and the important factors to be considered in interpreting the information are outlined. A pre-planning information form, a sample questionnaire for agency heads, and a sample survey for community residents are appended. (PF)

ED 098932
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LIBRARY SERVICE GUIDES

Appalachian Adult Education Center

ASSESSING COMMUNITY INFORMATION AND SERVICE NEEDS

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APPALACHIAN ADULT EDUCATION CENTER

Public Library Training Institutes
Library Service Guide No. 2

ASSESSING COMMUNITY INFORMATION AND SERVICE NEEDS

by

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Preface

This guide is one of a series on library services to disadvantaged adults. The purpose of the series is to explore alternative ways public libraries can expand services to this special group.

Each guide attempts to recognize the differences among public library budgets, staff size and training, and the differences among the communities libraries serve. Each guide deals with a particular service and, where possible, suggests several alternative ways the library can provide that service to disadvantaged adults. The library, then, can and should further adapt the suggestions to fit the resources and needs of its local community.

The guides combine (1) a thorough search of the library literature; (2) the knowledge of professional librarians, who wrote many of the guides and evaluated the entire series; and (3) the experience of the Appalachian Adult Education Center (AAEC) in designing interagency educational programs for disadvantaged adults.

The AAEC has worked with state, regional, and local public libraries in seven states in projects funded by the Bureau of Libraries and Learning Resources of the U.S. Office of Education. In one project, four urban and three rural centers demonstrated ways public libraries and adult basic education programs could improve their services to disadvantaged adults by coordinating efforts in reader guidance, recruitment, library orientation, community referral, and in the selection, use, and delivery of materials. The AAEC also conducted institutes in local public libraries in seven states in designing and implementing library services for disadvantaged adults.

Work on those and other projects led to three conclusions, upon which the guides are based: (1) that undereducated adults need information and services to help solve problems; (2) that the public library can meet those needs through adjustments in procedures and interagency cooperation; and (3) that the materials and services required for disadvantaged adults are useful and useable to all adults.

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INTRODUCTION

Assessing Community Needs is a Part of Planning

Library services in a community do not just happen. Effective library services require careful planning, and assessing community information and service needs is an important tool in that planning. Assessing the community's needs for information and services gives the library valuable information for setting priorities and for designing services that fit the needs and wants of the community. Assessing community needs is particularly important before starting to develop specialized services, so the services can be based on the information, service, and program needs of the target group.

Community Assessments Point to Community Needs

Assessments of community information and service needs often reveal gaps in library services to certain groups in the community. The assessment may reveal a number of undereducated and poor people who are not using library services and who need special consideration in planning programs. It may also identify other groups that need specialized services—such as the elderly, young adults, or neighborhoods isolated from branch libraries and bookmobile routes.

The assessment may point to

- *gaps in the collection.* New materials—or different kinds of materials—may be needed.

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- *duplication of services.* The library may need to share resources with other information and service agencies.

- *needed outreach services.* New or rearranged bookmobile stops, books by mail, deposit collections, or other outreach may be required to meet community needs.

Assessments are Important to the Community

An assessment of community needs for expanded library services is important to many people:

- *Staff members* become aware of the groups of people who make up the community and the many kinds of information and service needs they have. Their jobs should become more meaningful as they develop service goals and priorities.

- *The board* needs to know the reasons for service priorities so policies and budgets can be changed to accommodate the needed services. The assessment will help them estimate future budget needs for specialized services, and provide them with facts that can be used in fund raising with local government.

- *Local government and planning commissions* should be informed of the library service needs of special groups in the community, so library services can be included in their long-range plans.

- *Other agencies* become aware of the library's desire to serve all segments of the population. They see the library as a community planning agency and a partner with them in community education.

- *Library clients* will benefit from expanded library services that result from a realistic look at community needs and resources.

Assessing community information and service needs involves three major steps:

(1) collecting the information;

(2) interpreting the information; and

(3) developing a plan of action.

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STEP 1: COLLECTING THE INFORMATION

This section answers the following questions about collecting information on community information and service needs:

- What information is needed?
- Where can the information be found?
- What methods can be used to collect the information?

What Information is Needed?

Information is needed on the people in the community: their age groups, incomes, educational levels, their cultural backgrounds, and life-styles.

Information is also needed on community resources: educational opportunities, community services, cultural and recreational resources, community information and referral services.

Appendix A, "Pre-planning Information for Expanding Services," shows the kinds of information the library needs to collect about community needs and community resources. The form is useful for recording the facts and organizing them into meaningful categories for interpretation.

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Where Can the Information Be Found?

The pre-planning information form suggests sources for each category of information it lists. Some other general sources are:

- state, regional, or local library files
- local government officials and community leaders
- the state department of commerce or local chamber of commerce
- adult education directors
- community residents
- heads of community agencies and organizations that serve the library's high priority service groups; for example, the county extension and home demonstration agents, health department nutritional aides, planning commissions or area development districts, mental health care staffs, housing authorities, tenant's rights groups, the director of federal programs for the local school system, nurses associations, and community action programs.

What Methods Can be Used to Collect the Information?

Information for assessing community needs can be collected in several ways. This section describes seven methods of collecting the information, with the advantages, disadvantages, and cost/benefits of each. Cost/benefits must be considered when evaluating and selecting information-gathering methods. Some ways of getting information about the community take more time, effort and more money than others, but provide important benefits in public relations and useful information.

Method 1: The Pre-planning Information Form

Collecting facts and figures with the pre-planning information form is an essential task for assessment, and it should be completed before any other method is used. It takes the least time and effort of any method, but it gives no direct insight into the information and service needs of the special population the library seeks to serve. It does, however, point to the groups in the community that need information and services. Other methods can be used to find out more about the kinds of information and services they need.

Method 2: Telephone Interviews with Agency Heads

This method is expensive in staff time, but it can provide useful information about the library service needs of the clients the agency serves. Telephone conversations allow the agency and the library to explain their purposes, goals, and services to each other, and to explore together the possibilities for cooperation and coordination of services. Appendix B indicates the kinds

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of information the library needs to collect from the heads of service agencies.

Method 3: Telephone Interviews with Community Residents

This method gives a first-hand account of the information needs of the target group in the community. It is a good idea to contact the local service agencies to ask their cooperation in selecting people to interview. The local ABE teacher is a good source of the names and telephone numbers of adults who will be willing to be interviewed by phone. Direct contact with the target population, though costly in staff time, is valuable in getting a realistic idea of the information and service needs of the people to be served. Appendix C shows the kinds of information the library needs to collect from community residents.

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Method 4: Sending Questionnaires to Agency Heads

The next step up in expense, a needs assessment questionnaire gives an overview of the information needs of the target population to receive expanded services. At the same time, it helps promote the library's image, and helps the library discover community resources to share the difficulties of expanding services. Questionnaire surveys, however, do have certain limitations. Besides the problems of design, typing, duplication, and mailing, a questionnaire is only as good as its questions. And since not all the questionnaires will be returned, there is a chance of a self-selected and perhaps biased reply. Questionnaires that are not returned should be followed up by a telephone or personal interview. Appendix A is a sample questionnaire for gathering community need information from agencies and organizations. It could also be used for interviews.

Method 5: Sending Questionnaires to Community Residents

This method requires selecting residents to receive questionnaires from the high priority service groups identified in the pre-planning information form. Certain government agencies, the local department of education, housing authority, employment office, food stamp office, office of economic security, and others, will cooperate in assessing the information needs of the target population. Although they may not give the names and addresses of their clients, they may send out the questionnaire, if the postage is guaranteed. The purpose of the survey must be clear to the agencies before they will give their cooperation. This requires a preliminary mailing or telephone call, which decreases the cost benefit of this method. Another limitation is a probable low rate of questionnaire return. This method does have the important advantage, however, of gathering

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information from the people to be served. Appendix C shows a sample questionnaire for community residents.

Method 6: Personal Interviews with Agency Heads

Interviews are costly and time-consuming, but they do provide useful information. The interviewer can (1) find out the information needs of the community from the point of view of the agency, (2) explain the purpose of the assessment and how the library plans to use the information it collects, and (3) establish contacts that may be valuable as the library expands its services. The library board and staff must judge whether the public relations provided and the information gained from this approach justify its costs.

Method 7: Personal Interviews with Community Residents

Because most people are wary of strangers with questions, an intermediary is helpful. Even then the interviewee may be hesitant to give information other than what he thinks the interviewer wants to hear. If the interviewer can convince the adult of his/her sincerity and interest in providing services based on needs, the interview will yield better results. This method is costly but the benefits are great: the librarian-interviewer is likely to get realistic information about the needs of people in the community, and the interviewee is likely to get a new and broader view of the library.

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STEP 2: INTERPRETING THE INFORMATION

Interpreting the collected information is an essential part of assessing community information and service needs. The following suggests some questions the library should ask about the information it has collected to translate the raw facts into useful information for planning expanded services. Questions for interpretation are arranged around the categories of information listed on the pre-planning information form.

Population Statistics

What are the age groups of the people in the library's service area? Children, young adults, working age adults, and the elderly all have unique information and service needs. A large proportion of any age group could indicate that additional materials are required. The elderly, for example, may require large print books, information on medicare, social security, or retirement planning, and expanded outreach services. Large numbers of working adults may need readjusted library open hours.

Education Levels

What is the educational level of most adults in the community? Most people read at least two grade levels below the number of years they completed in school. Do the library's materials fit their reading levels? For undereducated adults, does the library have easy to read and nonprint materials with adult content? Are there GED preparatory

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	materials for adults to study for the high school equivalency exam?
Economic Levels	What is the average income? Are many families below the poverty index? Perhaps they need materials on employment, money management, or how not to get cheated. Poor people cannot afford to buy their information, so the public library becomes very important to them if it offers information and services they can use. Poor people may also feel that library services are for the middle class. Outreach services may be necessary, to demonstrate the library's role in serving all the people in the community.
National and Racial Backgrounds	What is the unemployment level in your community? Is information available on employment services, how to find, get, keep a job, and on job opportunities in the community? Does the library provide technical and professional materials to fit the information needs of the community's business and industry?
	What are the predominant national and racial backgrounds in the community? Are there special groups within the community who need different cultural, ethnic, or language materials, or special programs based on their cultural history and heritage?
Geographic Area	What is the geographic scope of the area the library serves? Is the community large urban, small urban, or rural? The urban community may need a branch library; rural communities may need books by mail or expanded bookmobile services. If possible, evaluate the stability of the population in terms of in-and-out-migration. Does the library have materials and services to fit the needs of new people and industries moving in?
Educational Offerings	What educational opportunities are available in the area? Does the library have a list or directory of schools, colleges, vocational-technical schools, vocational rehabilitation services, adult education, and federal training projects? Is there information about available training, where to get it, how to apply, and how to get financial assistance? Is there information about the educational programs of voluntary organizations such as Action Volunteers, the United Fund and local churches, and clubs?
Other Community Resources	What community resources are available?
	Can the library share resources with any of these community resources to provide expanded library services and educational information to the people in the community? For example, might a

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	Community Action bus be used to take people to the library for tours, or for GED-preparatory classes in the library? What community resources are available which might share materials with the public library? • school libraries • vocational and technical school libraries • special libraries—medical or industrial • bookstores and drug stores • academic libraries • pamphlet racks in medical and agency offices		• act as a data collection and updating clearinghouse for agencies that already provide I & R services?
Information and Referral Services	What information and referral services exist in the community? Could the library • develop community information and referral services? • develop a community referral handbook and make it available to other agencies? or		

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STEP 3: DEVELOPING A PLAN OF ACTION

If the information collected for the community needs assessment is not used to help the library set priorities and develop programs to fit community needs, then the assessment is an exercise in futility and should not be done. The following suggests some ways the library can use the information it has collected and interpreted to develop programs that fit the needs of the community.

When the library has completed the pre-planning information form and followed through with other assessment methods, it should know: (1) the characteristics of the people in the library's service area; (2) the groups the library is and is not serving; (3) the information and service needs of new service groups; and (4) the resources available in the community to share in the services to new service groups. When all this data is compiled and interpreted, program planning can begin.

Looking at Library Priorities

The assessment may point out needs the library feels it cannot fulfill because of its present responsibilities and priorities. At this point it may be necessary to compare existing services and programs with what is needed. An assessment of library tasks, priorities for those tasks, and the staff time spent on those tasks can help the library adjust its present services and programs to accommodate new priorities.

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A chart filled out during a staff meeting can point up existing work priorities by showing how staff members spend their time.

The chart might look like this:

TASK	PRIORITY WEIGHT	TIME SPENT
List the tasks performed in the library	Assign a priority weight to each task, on a scale from one to ten, with one high	Indicate time spent on the task

This chart may show high priority tasks getting little time spent on them, or low priority tasks receiving a disproportionate amount of staff time. A reorganization of tasks may be needed to free staff and money for new priorities.

Planning with Other Agencies

When the library has identified community needs, community resources, and its own priorities, it should share that information with all the other agencies and institutions in the community. The library might arrange a meeting of the representatives from all those organizations concerned with meeting community needs, to look at problems and to plan cooperative services that avoid duplication and meet the community's needs.

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Appendix A

Preplanning Information
for
Expanding Services for Disadvantaged Adults

STATE _____ **TOWN** _____ **DATE** _____

Instructions: Please describe your community by answering the following questions as completely as possible.

Area of Information	Information to Include	Source of Information	Fill in Here
A. Population Statistics	How many people in your service area?	1970 U.S. Census State Departments of Education School Boards	_____
	Age of population No. of children 0-18 years No. of adults 18-64 No. of adults 65+		_____ _____ _____
B. Educational Levels of Population	Percent and number of out-of-school adults over 16 who have less than 8 years of schooling	1970 U.S. Census, or Area Supervisor of Adult Basic Education	% _____ No. _____
	Percent and number of out-of school adults over 16 who have less than 12 years of schooling		% _____ No. _____

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Area of Information	Information to Include	Source of Information	Fill in Here
C. Economic Levels of Population	Percent of families whose income is $3,000 or below	1970 U.S. Census Employment Security	% _____
	Median Income Family Per Capita	Welfare agencies Community Action Programs	_____ _____ _____
	Percent of unemployment of adults over 16		% _____
	What are the chief employers for your service area?	Employment Security Mayor's Office Local Planning Commission Community Action Program	NAME/KIND OF WORK PRESENTLY _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ NEW _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____

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Area of Information	Information to Include	Source of Information	Fill in Here
D. National and racial background of population	Give percent of racial and national groups which make up the population of your service area	1970 U.S. Census City, County, or Area Supervisor of Adult Basic Education NAACP	CITY / COUNTY White ____ ____ Black ____ ____ Non English-Speaking ____ ____ Indian ____ ____ Oriental ____ ____ Other ____ ____
E. Geographic area you serve	Square miles		_____
F. Annual Income of the library	Total cash	Head Librarian	_____
G. Library card holders		Head Librarian	_____
H. Educational offerings in community for disadvantaged	List of adult basic education and other educational activities available to your service area	City or County Supervisor of Adult Education Community Action Program Public Schools Private Schools Area Vocational Schools Bureau of Rehabilitation Services	KIND/SITE/NO. ENROLLED _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____ _____

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Area of Information	Information to Include	Source of Information	Fill in Here
		MDTA (Manpower Development Training Act)	
		WIN (Work Incentive)	
		NYC (Neighborhood Youth Corps)	
		CEP (Concentrated Employment Programs)	
		New Careers Program	
		Voluntary Groups	
1. Other Community services available to disadvantaged adults	List of community services available to disadvantaged adults	Health Department	SERVICE/AGENCY
		Welfare Department	
		Social Security	
		Community Action Programs	
		Comprehensive Care	
		Food & Nutrition Services	
		Child Care Programs	
		Housing Authorities	
		Voluntary Groups	
		Planning Commission	
		Mental Health	
		Family Planning Clinic	
		Radio Stations	
		Newspapers	
		Senior Citizens	
		Home Demonstration Agent	
		Agricultural Extension Agent	

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Area of Information	Information to Include	Source of Information	Fill in Here
J. Information and referral services available	Is there a central source of community agency and organization in your community	United Fund Public Library Planning Commission Comprehensive Health Care	
Additional Information			

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Appendix B

COMMUNITY NEEDS ASSESSMENT
SAMPLE QUESTIONNAIRE FOR AGENCY HEADS

The _____ Public Library is planning expansion of services to disadvantaged adults. We need your help in identifying the information, service and materials needs of this priority service group. Please fill out this questionnaire and return at your earliest convenience. Thank you for your cooperation.

Agency: _____ Name: _____ Date: _____

1. What proportion of those you serve are disadvantaged adults? (We define disadvantaged adults as anyone 16 years or older who is out of school with less than a high school education, or whose income is below a poverty index.) Please check one.

   ☐ None ☐ Quarter ☐ Half ☐ Almost all ☐ All

2. List three subjects about which you think your clients need information. The AAEC's *Coping Skills Categories: Areas of Information Need for Disadvantaged Adults* can be used as a checklist of subjects.

3. List or include samples of informational materials your group distributes that could become part of the library's collection.

4. The following is a list of library services that exist now or could be developed. Please check those that would be useful to you in your work or to your disadvantaged adult clients.

   ☐ 1. Library tours and orientation to the library

   ☐ 2. Pamphlets delivered to your agency on subjects of interest to your clients

   ☐ 3. Community room in the library available for meetings or classes

   ☐ 4. Adult book talks on topics of interest to your clients

   ☐ 5. Easy to read books and paperbacks about adult problems

   ☐ 6. Small collections of library materials in the community

   ☐ 7. Other

   _____

   _____

The _____ Public Library would like to be of service to you and your clients.

Please call _____ (Name) at _____ (Number)

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October, 1974

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SAMPLE COMMUNITY SURVEY FOR COMMUNITY RESIDENTS

Your _____ Public Library wants to give you the kind of books, paperbacks and pamphlets that you want to read. We also want to have records, films, filmstrips, and tapes that you want to use.

1. Check the kinds of information you would like to have.

- ☐ How to find, get and keep a job
- ☐ How to get along with your family
- ☐ How to get along with your children
- ☐ How to stay healthy
- ☐ How to buy on credit
- ☐ How not to get cheated
- ☐ How to get help if you need it
- ☐ How to get more education
- ☐ How to get insurance
- ☐ How to use spare time
- ☐ How to get along with friends and neighbors
- ☐ How to move to another town
- ☐ Understanding yourself
- ☐ Taxes
- ☐ How to solve your transportation problems
- ☐ What happens as you get older
- ☐ Other _____

_____

2. Who would you go to *first* to get information on how to solve your problems? Check one:

- ☐ Family
- ☐ Friends
- ☐ Public Library
- ☐ Minister
- ☐ Another Office
- ☐ Other _____

3. In your opinion, are there many adults in your neighborhood who do not have high school diplomas? Check one.

- ☐ A few
- ☐ Some
- ☐ More than half
- ☐ Many

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LIBRARY SERVICE GUIDES

1. Materials Selection for Disadvantaged Adults
2. Assessing Community Information and Service Needs
3. Using Pamphlets with Disadvantaged Adults
4. Deposit Collections of Special Materials for Disadvantaged Adults
5. Utilizing Volunteers in Expanding Library Services to Disadvantaged Adults
6. Books By Mail Services: Moving the Library to Disadvantaged Adults
7. Evening and Weekend Library Services for Disadvantaged Adults
8. The Library as a Community Information and Referral Center
9. Planning the Expansion of Library Services to Disadvantaged Adults
10. Working with Library Trustees to Expand Library Services to Disadvantaged Adults
11. Reader Guidance Services for Disadvantaged Adults
12. The Recruitment of Disadvantaged Adults: Effective Publicity
13. Conducting Tours to the Library for Groups of Disadvantaged Adults
14. ABE—What Is It?
15. The Relationship of Disadvantagement to Library Services
16. In-service Training of Personnel to Serve Disadvantaged Adults
17. Adult Education in the Library: ABE, GED, CLEP, and the Open University
18. Book Talks: Encouraging Library Materials Usage by Disadvantaged Adults
19. Techniques for Teachers: Teaching the Application of Basic Skills to Everyday Life Problems
20. Displaying Materials for Disadvantaged Adults
21. Bookmobile Services: Moving the Library to Disadvantaged Adults
22. Expanding Library Services to the Elderly
23. Using Audiovisuals With Disadvantaged Adults
24. Expanding Library Services to the Institutionalized
25. Interagency Cooperation: The Public Library and Agencies that Serve Disadvantaged Adults
26. Adjusting School Libraries for Use by Disadvantaged Adults
27. Speakers Bureaus for Disadvantaged Adults
28. Maintaining Separate Collections of Library Materials for Disadvantaged Adults
29. Client Participation in Expanding Library Services to Disadvantaged Adults
30. The Role of the College Library in the Education of Disadvantaged Adults
31. Public Library Services to Young Disadvantaged Adults
32. Working with Elected Officials to Expand Library Services to Disadvantaged Adults

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The work presented in this document was performed pursuant to a grant from the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Office of Education, Bureau of Libraries and Learning Resources [OEG-0-73-5341]. However, the opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of the U. S. Office of Education, but are the sole responsibility of the Appalachian Adult Education Center.